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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR TAHIR-KHELI HIGHLIGHTS WOMEN'S
EMPOWERMENT IN PAKISTAN

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

11. (C) Summary: Senior Adviser to the Secretary for Women's Empowerment Ambassador Shirin Tahir-Kheli visited Islamabad on November 24 and 25 to discuss women's empowerment issues and the Women Against Terrorism Initiative. Ambassador Tahir-Kheli met with National Security Adviser Mahmud Ali Durrani who spoke about Pakistan's economy and efforts to counter terrorism. She also met Minister of Information Sherry Rehman, Speaker of the National Assembly Dr. Fehmida Mirza, and Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir. End Summary.

NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER MAHMUD ALI DURRANI

12. (C) Ambassador Tahir-Kheli and the DCM called upon National Security Adviser Mahmud Ali Durrani. Durrani highlighted the various steps that Pakistan has taken to empower women, including special reserved seats for women in Parliament, the formation of the Women,s Caucus, and women enlisted in the military. He stressed that the new Women,s Caucus in the National Assembly is an important network to unite women parliamentarians.

13. (C) When asked about the political wing of the ISI being disbanded, Durrani explained that the political wing had originally been set up by former Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. Recently, Prime Minister Gilani has asked in a friendly and non-confrontational manner, "why should the ISI be involved in politics?" Durrani credited Pasha with the decision to take ISI out of politics. Durrani explained that ISI is basically a good institution, but it is dependent on how the political leadership decides to use it.

14. (C) Durrani explained that Pakistan is going through a very difficult time, both economically and security-wise. He said the primary role of the IMF was to "plug holes" and to improve Pakistan,s economic health. The IMF would help get rid of subsidies, corruption, and help with budget development - all necessary to get Pakistan on "the straight and narrow." Durrani emphasized that Pakistan needed to expand its tax base, especially in the commerce sector. In his opinion, the Pakistani economic base is so narrow that it cannot withstand serious shocks.

15. (C) In his discussion of security, Durrani mentioned the recent military success in Bajaur. The difference this time around, in his mind, was that the military was following things through to their logical end. Durrani said that

before in South Waziristan, the military had to halt operations and then go in to sign a peace agreement. This time they were in a better position. He described the formation of lashkars as a major development. However, he cautioned that lashkars are a short term solution for a specific task. The lashkars are made of normal people with real jobs, so they are more a moral support for the community for military operations in the long run than a fighting force. Durrani also commented on the critical juncture between military operations and enforcing the writ of the government. He said the GOP can not delay the transition, that law and order must be provided through a civilian government as the military pulls out. This requires civil/military cooperation and follow-up. If the transition is delayed, the militants come back and the local populace is defeated.

¶6. (C) Ambassador Tahir-Kheli asked Durrani about statements by Prime Minister Gilani that the US may be contributing to suicide attacks. Durrani commented that while such statements were counterproductive, the drone attacks were also not helping at all. He said that Gilani is a politician and since public opinion is anti-drone, he made such statements. Durrani regretfully described how Peshawar and the NWFP had changed for the worse.

¶7. (C) Describing the Friends of Pakistan, Durrani commented that it was not a replacement for the donor,s conference, but a forum to ensure good governance practices in Pakistan. Durrani also highlighted the Benazir Bhutto Income Support Fund as a means to avoid cutting back on development while

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upholding the IMF agreement. Within the Friends of Pakistan, Durrani cited the U.S., the UK, and the UAE as the prime movers. The National Security Adviser stressed the need for good governance and told an anecdote about a common man describing to him the basic needs in Pakistan. He outlined them as a fair wage, protection of life and property, access to justice, and basic dignity. Durrani stressed that good governance should be able to deliver these demands.

MINISTER OF INFORMATION SHERRY REHMAN

¶8. (C) Pakistan,s Minister of Information Sherry Rehman hosted a working lunch to discuss the Women Against Terrorism initiative. In addition to Ambassador Tahir-Kheli, participants included Special Adviser to the Greek Foreign Minister on Women,s Empowerment Dr. Kalliopi Bourdara, the Greek Ambassador to Pakistan Petros Mavroidis, and Political Counselor Candace Putnam. Minister Rehman opened the meeting by highlighting the steps taken by the Pakistani government on women,s empowerment issues, including the new Women,s Caucus and a planned new ombudsman in the National Assembly for women,s affairs.

¶9. (C) The lunch served as a preparatory meeting for the upcoming Women Against Terrorism conference, a joint Greece-Pakistan initiative that grew out of the Secretary's Women Leaders' Working Group. The initiative was publicly launched on the sidelines of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) summit in Helsinki (December 4). During the lunch, the procedures to set up the conference were finalized and an interim planning session was set. An International Women,s Conference Against Terrorism will be held subsequently in Athens (Spring 2009) under the auspices of the Greek Government and in the context of the Women,s Leaders Working Group. The attendees also decided on the topics for the conference workshops, the dignitaries and scholars to be invited, and the focus of the conference.

¶10. (C) Minister Rehman stressed the particular vulnerability of women to terrorism and that terrorism had no religion. For the international conference the following model was

adopted: a brief opening plenary with two key note addresses, followed by workshops, and a closing plenary. Other suggestions for the conference included using a short film to raise awareness, including journalists and media representatives, and also ensuring diverse geographic representation.

SPEAKER OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY DR. FEHMIDA MIRZA

¶11. (C) Ambassador Tahir-Kheli and the Political Counselor met with Speaker of the National Assembly who that day was also Acting President. Dr. Mirza discussed several new initiatives she has led within the National Assembly. She has used the Speaker's Relief Fund to help displaced women of Bajaur. All parliamentarians contributed one month's salary to the fund and Dr. Mirza sought donations from Chambers of Commerce and other political donors. On September 14, the Speaker, various parliamentarians, and representatives from NWFP visited the displaced persons camps in Peshawar and distributed 2 million PKR (25,000 USD). Additionally, the fund is giving 5 million PKR (62,500 USD) to orphans from the recent Balochistan earthquake. Dr. Mirza was very encouraged by the response from the Speaker's Relief Fund - with the President and other leaders giving both financial and moral support. She also commented that President Zardari was very supportive of women's empowerment, championing programs where land titles would be awarded in women's names.

¶12. (C) Dr. Mirza recently helped to establish the Women's Caucus in the National Assembly. The focus of the caucus is capacity building of female parliamentarians across party lines. The caucus will interface with NGOs and activists on women's issues, specifically harassment, access to justice, and violence against women. Additionally, the Women's Caucus will be able to champion legislation, such as the proposed Sexual Harassment at the Workplace legislation. The

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female members of the National Assembly have agreed to work above party lines, and make decisions based on consensus. The Women's Caucus plans to expand eventually to the Senate and then to the Provincial Assemblies - forming a National Women's Caucus. The Women's Caucus first fact-finding event will be a trip on November 29 to visit female police stations and receive briefings from the Inspector General of Police. Dr. Mirza commented that the Caucus is a great network to gain best practices and technical knowledge from international women's networks such as Secretary Rice's One Woman Initiative. Dr. Mirza is planning to visit the United States in March 2009 and plans to talk to Speaker Nancy Pelosi in March as well.

FOREIGN SECRETARY SALMAN BASHIR

¶13. (C) Ambassador Tahir-Kheli met with Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir to discuss the Women Against Terrorism initiative being co-sponsored by Pakistan and Greece. In discussing women's empowerment, Secretary Bashir noted that making 50% of one's population non-players only makes the economy suffer. Bashir agreed with Ambassador Tahir-Kheli that on the front of women's empowerment, Pakistan has regressed and lost focus. Bashir also noted that the cultural context was important, and hoped there is more optimism with the new PPP government. He stressed the most important thing for Pakistan is to engage with the US closely at the institutional level. Pakistan, in his view, is suffering from institutional decay and that causes many areas to suffer, including women's affairs. Bashir stated that the world has changed and the Pakistani system needs updating, especially in the area of governance.

¶14. (C) Ambassador Shirin Tahir-Kheli has cleared this cable.

